

No Chance of Escape

Ok Computer @ 20



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OK Computer @ 20

Exit Music: How Radiohead's *OK Computer* Destroyed the Art-Pop Album in Order to Save It

Held up as a pillar of artistic and commercial success for the last 20 years, Radiohead's epochal third album is an undisputed classic—but is it the last of its kind?

By Marc Hogan

In the middle of
Meeting People Is Easy,
the impressionistic
documentary about
Radiohead's captivatingly
miserable world tour for
OK Computer, Thom Yorke
allows himself a rare
moment of hero worship.

Following a triumphant late-night TV performance, as slurry shots of Times Square fill the screen, he reflects on formative inspirations like R.E.M. and the Smiths. "The freakiest thing about all of this... is the idea that you would be *one of those bands* to somebody," he murmurs dreamily. "That thing of it being imprinted on your heart, you know?... That in itself is a reason to keep going."

Then his New York City cab is seen pulling up to a nightclub, where a bouncer unceremoniously denies Yorke entry to what seems to be his own party, taunting the singer: "Radiohead! Creep! Dickhead!"

Outspoken door guys aside, Radiohead were already becoming "one of those bands" following the release of *OK Computer* in the summer of 1997. The press hype around the record was so heaping that Yorke himself dismissed it in real time, scoffing elsewhere in the film, "It's bollocks!" The album wasn't just a critics' darling, either; at this point, *OK Computer* has sold more than 4.5 million copies worldwide. But the awkwardness of that taxi scene captures a tension that defined their appeal.

With *OK Computer*, Radiohead made their grand artistic statement and savvily got it to sell—all while

pointing out the absurdities of the system they were skillfully manipulating. This tactic was particularly resonant at a time when the vocabulary of rock still dominated music media, with the innovations of electronic music lurking just left of center, and the era's "alternative" culture giving way to unabashed pop. It was a moment unlike any other, when making a record that at once epitomized and subverted the rock album ideal would lead to it being crowned the best album ever.

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When *OK Computer* came out, it sounded to some like rock's future. But it also represented the latest in a hoary tradition: the classic art-pop album. First in 1998 and again in 2006, readers of the staid British music monthly *Q* voted the twitching opus as the greatest album of all-time, ahead of not just R.E.M. and the Smiths, but the Beatles and the Beach Boys, too. As *OK Computer* turns 20 this year, it's difficult to name a guitar-based full-length since that has matched its combination of critical and commercial success, along with its stylistic adventurousness. Some of the most acclaimed rock albums of the last 20 years, including the Strokes' *Is This It*, the White Stripes' *White Blood Cells*, and Interpol's *Turn on the Bright Lights*, drew on vintage sounds; others, like Arcade Fire's *Funeral*, lacked *OK Computer*'s vast marketing and recording budget; none of them matched *OK Computer*'s sales numbers.

One way to explain the absence of a manifest 21st-century equivalent to *OK Computer* is that *OK Computer* was an ending point. Part of this line of reasoning has to do with the technological shifts that have affected the album format itself. British writer Tim Footman, in his 2007 book *Welcome to the Machine: OK Computer and the Death of the Classic Album*, suggested that the modern potential for varied, customized listening experiences "helps to ensure that *OK Computer* is the last entry into the Rock Album Hall of Fame."

Personalized playlists show up regularly on listeners' phones today, but the idea of an album has proven to be stubbornly persistent. It is still the unit that organizes so much of the cultural discussion around music, in year-end polls, on award shows, and in streaming exclusives. As shown by the continuing flow of ambitious albums, the desire to make a complete musical statement is still alive and well, but the identities of the artists making those statements—and the musical tools they use—have changed. Radiohead's landmark LP wasn't the last, then. It opened the way for new firsts.

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If *OK Computer* didn't exist, people who think too hard about the album format would have had to invent it. Of course, the story of popular music has always been partly about technology. The standard 33 1/3 rpm vinyl LP was a breakthrough for listeners when it was introduced in 1948, more than tripling the amount of music that could be held on each side of a record. Within 10 years, overall industry revenues more than doubled.

In the '60s, a new class of critics started championing the pop album as "an artistic pursuit" worthy of the reverence that had then been reserved for literature or classical music. The concept album emerged. But all this focus on respectability, craft, and European written traditions downplayed the populism, spontaneity, and American oral traditions that jostled for attention in the rowdy singles marketplace. Was it *good* if pop music wanted to be poetry? And there was the issue of who the critics' emphasis on art-pop albums too often left out: black musicians and women. Through the entire album era, music made by innovators like Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Prince, Kate Bush, and Public Enemy had made its way into the rock-stuffed canon, but they were often the exception. (*OK Computer* landing at the top on those *Q* all-time lists is less impressive when you notice that neither had an album by a woman or person of color in the top 10—and, in their 2006 tally, not even a

woman or person of color in the top 30.)

The term "concept album" soon traveled from critics to marketers. The Beatles opened the floodgates with *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and in the decade that followed, no shortage of bands used the pretense of "art" to sell tens of millions of records. Led by blockbusters like Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, record sales spiraled upward until 1977, when they began ticking downward.

The record industry's challenges at that time ranged from a resurgent Hollywood to arcade games, but aesthetics and technology also played a role. Among critics, the singles-oriented dawn of punk briefly threatened the understood hierarchy of album rankings, although LPs like the Clash's *London Calling* soon took their place in the pantheon. The spread of cassettes and CDs in the '80s broke up the album with home taping and easier song skipping, while the rise of MTV put more attention on splashy hits than full-length works. In 1988, pop sociologist Simon Frith warned of impending doom for "the record era"—and maybe, ominously, "pop music as we know it."

But such dire predictions were unwarranted, and albums maintained their supremacy. In 1991, Nirvana's *Nevermind* rocketed its way to selling more than 30 million copies worldwide and generating nearly as many words of critical acclaim. And whether the playback format was vinyl or plastic, it turned out, didn't matter so much: *SPIN*'s original *Nevermind* review gushed, "You'll be humming all the songs for the rest of your life—or at least until your CD/tape/album wears out." And when Radiohead first turned heads with the loud-quiet-loud angst of "Creep," from their 1993 debut *Pablo Honey*, they soon found themselves in the thick of the grunge zeitgeist.

But rather than build on the success of "Creep" with an album of transatlantic flannel anthems—they could have been the British Stone Temple Pilots—Radiohead's sophomore album, 1995's *The Bends*, was gorgeously introspective, albeit lacking another conspicuous radio hit. They opened

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for R.E.M. and Alanis Morissette, and the record peaked on the U.S. album charts at No. 88, a year after its release. The spotlight was ready—but by now Radiohead were growing used to sidestepping it.

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With the band's third album, label executives expected hits: "The Big American Crossover Album, like [U2]'s *The Joshua Tree*," guitarist Jonny Greenwood recalled. A few new songs they were testing out on the road, including a soaring radio-friendly track titled "Lift," were winning over audiences. The group bought their own recording equipment and got to work—first in a mobile studio called Canned Applause and then in a 15th-century mansion owned by actress Jane Seymour—with producer Nigel Godrich.

Well, "Lift" still sounds like a festival-ready behemoth—and it still hasn't been released. Radiohead's U.S. label, Capitol, reportedly slashed its sales projections from 2 million copies to 500,000 when it actually heard *OK Computer*. (Apparently, a Macintosh robot voice droning about frozen shit did not scream superstardom.) But the art-pop gambit would pay off for Radiohead as it had for '70s progressive rockers, just as record sales were getting back to their concept album-era heights. Here was a band that combined Nirvana's downtrodden sensibility with Pink Floyd's drama.

The choice for *OK Computer*'s lead single, the six-and-a-half-minute Pixies-do-"Bohemian Rhapsody" epic

"Paranoid Android," embraced a lack of predictable marketability as its own, offbeat sort of appeal. Capitol glued promo copies inside 1,000 cassette players and sent them to the press, radio stations, and retailers. Through presaging the anti-piracy measures that would follow the 1999 launch of Napster, the tactic above all indicated this was an album meant to be heard in full, in headphones.

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Enter the critics. The excitement around *OK Computer* and Radiohead was so great that music writers of all stripes seemed to need capital letters: "The Last Great Sincere Rock Band." "The Next Great Arena Rock Hope." "The Very Big Band." A week after *OK Computer*'s July 1, 1997 U.S. release, a press release boasted about the raves, citing a dozen critics by name. Many of the reviews, including a 10-out-of-10 exaltation from influential UK weekly *NME*, appeared to take the primacy of rock as a given. Plenty agreed with prominent critic Nick Kent, who wrote in the British monthly *Mojo*, "In 20 years time I'm betting *OK Computer* will be seen as the key record of 1997."

By year-end list season, *OK Computer* ended up at No. 1 in several publications, and No. 2 in a handful more. It was beaten out in the *Village Voice*'s Pazz & Jop poll and *Rolling Stone* only by Bob Dylan's 30th album, *Time Out of Mind*, and in *SPIN* by British duo Cornershop's presciently eclectic *When I Was Born* for the 7th Time. And where radio

balked, early MTV support for the memorable “Paranoid Android” and “Karma Police” videos also helped with exposure. By October 1997, *OK Computer* had sold 500,000 copies in America, reaching one million as of early 1998. This gloomy, fidgety album about alien abductions and crushed bugs was a huge sensation.

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OK Computer masterfully channeled the band members’ diverse tastes, which ranged from touchstones both common and outré. There’s a live-in-the-room recording style and nods toward the Beatles, the Beach Boys, and Phil Spector, but also clear traces of composers like Italian film-score giant Ennio Morricone and Polish avant-garde luminary Krzysztof Penderecki. And it’s not hard to tell that Radiohead had been listening to the looping and splicing experiments like DJ Shadow’s *Endtroducing...*, Miles Davis’ *Blitches Brew*, and records by Krautrock titans Can and Faust. This represented the budding omnivorousness of the times, sandwiched between Beck’s genre-defying *Odelay* in 1996 and the bluesy sprawl of OutKast’s *Aquemini* in 1998. Plus, the guitars on *OK Computer* seem tethered to pedals with minds of their own, as the lyrics turn toward otherworldly perspectives, balancing sonic gadgetry with an unease about technology’s dehumanizing potential. Yorke’s verses also have a whiff of dark humor, especially the self-parodying “Paranoid Android,” a very ambitious track that preaches how “ambition makes you look pretty ugly.”

Whether or not Radiohead knew it, the technological warnings implicit on *OK Computer* would soon come to pass in a way that would disrupt the idea of an album, as a commercial and aesthetic unit, forever. “A specter is haunting the music business: the prospect of listeners getting the music they want directly from the internet, free of charge.” *The New York Times* cautioned in 1998, echoing *The Communist Manifesto* in an article on the budding possibilities for digital distribution, both legal and otherwise. By 1999, the same paper proclaimed: “With the internet, the

idea of the album is dead.” Radiohead, it seemed, had made their classic LP just in time.

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In the years after the release of *OK Computer*, popular music went through another stylistic transition, with the early-’90s moment when weird alt culture could share a stage with Céline Dion giving way to nu-metal, teen-pop, and the broadly appealing politesse of “American Idol.” Total sales for the global recording industry topped out in 1999, at nearly \$29 billion, and then tumbled for more than a decade. Print journalism, which had thrown all of its weight behind *OK Computer*, saw its business collapse around the same time and for similar reasons.

Pundits appear to have been right that *OK Computer* was the last of a particular kind of album, one made by guitar-centered bands interested in creating a full-length artistic statement that could achieve mainstream popularity while advancing, but not departing from, the “rock” tradition. But *OK Computer* also pointed toward a post-rock reality; on 2000’s *Kid A*, the band made the break explicit, sidelining live instrumentation in favor of a dive into oblique electronic music. Though other rock groups had dabbled in techno flourishes before, *Kid A* once again sounded like the future. And with that album, all but the most diehard rockists finally had to admit the obvious: The classic art-pop album, as embodied by *OK Computer* or *Dark Side of the Moon*, didn’t depend on guitars at all. It’s no coincidence that, while nearly all of Radiohead’s records have been well-received, *Kid A* is the only one that typically rivals *OK Computer* in the best-album-ever sweepstakes.

Rock lost what remained of its commercial and cultural centrality in the years that followed. Meanwhile, the most groundbreaking music was being made by sleekly cosmopolitan hip-hop, R&B, and pop producers like Timbaland and the Neptunes. The burgeoning critical consensus that chart titans could be as significant as rock auteurs earned a name: popitism.

There were still great art-pop albums, but, increasingly, they weren't necessarily rock albums. That changed. Across the last 20 years, monumental rap, R&B, and pop records like D'Angelo's *Voodoo*, Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, and Beyoncé's *Lemonade* have filled the void of full-length statements with both artistic seriousness and mass appeal that was formerly largely occupied by guitar bands. At the same time, the ranks of professional music writers are becoming more diverse, which has no doubt also played a part in ending rock's disproportionate stranglehold on year-end lists.

Over the last few years, the traditional album has faced new problems. In 2014, global record industry revenues hit bottom; even as they're now crawling back up thanks to widespread streaming, it's still not an environment for high-risk bets on albums of questionable marketability. But that hasn't stopped some of music's biggest names from taking huge artistic plunges—in a way, it seems as though the lowered monetary stakes have caused people like Rihanna and Beyoncé to let their inner-art-student run free. And last year, Kanye West's *The Life of Pablo* made the definition of any specific album itself a form of artistic expression, through a number of post-release tweaks. The shape of the album to come remains to be envisioned.

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In 2017, *OK Computer* sits comfortably as a cultural touchstone, its inventiveness somewhat worn down by ubiquity. It's ensconced in the U.S. Library of Congress archive. Its songs have turned into boilerplate TV shorthand for dystopian alienation. More disturbingly, "Karma Police" provided the code name for a UK mass surveillance program. Twenty years later, is *this* what we get?

Well, yes and no. Radiohead's parallels can be heard today less among bands whose music resembles theirs than in artists of all genres who share a certain restless audacity; self-proclaimed fans range from rapper Danny Brown to R&B veteran Maxwell. Digital music has also expanded

access to far-flung records, so listeners may hear *Kid A* before *OK Computer*, or the more experimental influences on both before they can be shocked by a group that self-identified as "basically a dodgy pop band" back in 1997.

OK Computer quickly became one of those records that tattooed itself inside of millions of people, as Yorke mused in *Meeting People Is Easy*. But first those records have to be heard, and one way of doing that in the '90s was to create a festival-sized rock album. Confessing the hypocrisy of championing an anti-corporate message when Radiohead were playing corporate-funded MTV events while being signed to a major label, Yorke told *The Wire* in a 2001 interview: "Unfortunately, if you're interested in actually being heard, you have to work within the system." Naturally, he followed by subverting his own comment with a goofy German accent.

A few stories exist about the significance of *OK Computer*'s title, but the most revealing involves a corporate sponsor. "It's like the Coca-Cola advert from the '70s—I'd like to teach the world to sing," Yorke once said. "Imagine the same thing with a lot of little tiny home portable computers, kids of all creeds and colors, on top of a hill, all waving back and forth, going, '*OK Computer*' ... On the surface it's a positive and nice neat advertising slogan, but on the other side of that... it's fucking terrifying." Radiohead knew how to forge a human connection but, unlike so many Don Draper wannabes, they were also well aware of that same connection's potential for malice and exploitation. They were open-hearted doomsayers who pushed the disquieting power of classic art-pop at a critical time. They took advantage of the present while creating a strange balm for the future. They were smart. They were skeptical. They were lucky.

Twelve Visual Artists Interpret the 12 Songs on *OK Computer*

We asked a dozen artists to take a song from *OK Computer* and translate it through illustration. Here's what they created, along with commentary from each artist.



"Airbag"

MARIO HUGO

I wanted to create something that references both life and death, and almost feels like Munch's "The Scream." There is something pervasive here—a little enigmatic and dark—but then the portrait itself is slightly wondrous and innocent, like a naive, self-reflective effigy. Swirling stardust etches both the environment and the face equally, almost like they are consuming one another.



"Paranoid Android"

ERIK CARTER

While researching this song, I came across a story about how the lyrics were inspired by an incident where Thom Yorke saw someone spill a drink on a woman at a bar, and she turned violent. "There was a look in this woman's eyes that I'd never seen before anywhere," the singer once said. "Couldn't sleep that night because of it." I tried to imagine that look.



**"Subterranean
Homesick Alien"**

SALLY THURER

The narrator in the song paints terrestrial life as synthetic and space travel as enlightening, because seeing Earth from a distance puts his anxieties in perspective, so I wanted my illustration to focus on the boundary between manufactured and metaphysical space. The cracked pavement is the material world giving way to spiritual truth, to the sky.



**"Exit Music (For
a Film)"**

LALA ABADDON

To me, "Exit Music (For a Film)" is the darkest track on OK Computer, but it also has this suffocating lust and wet longing to it. That dichotomy is represented in the fluidity and distortion of my composition, which straddles the subconscious divide of a surrealist landscape and an abstract, reclining nude.



"Let Down"

DOUG JOHN MILLER

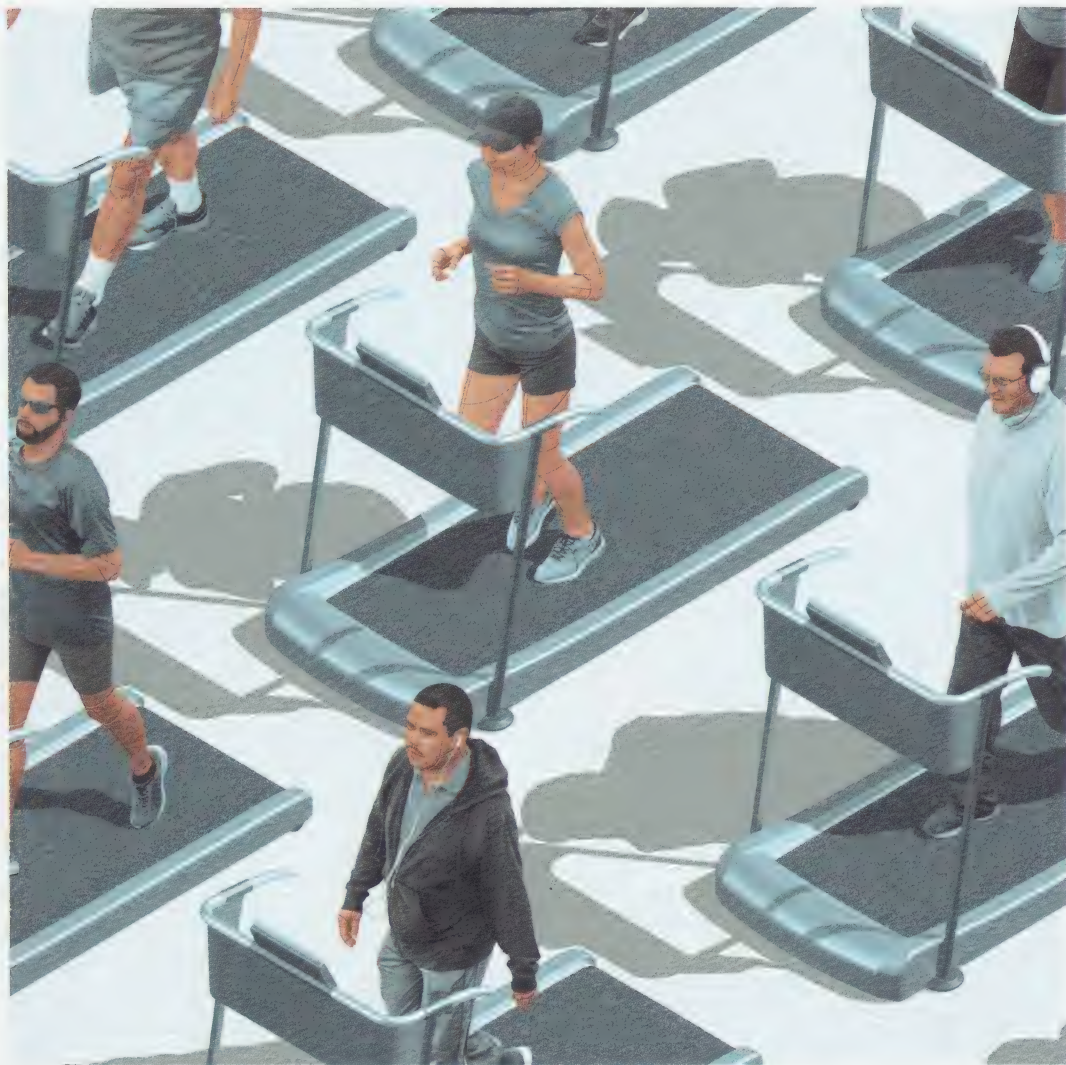
As a commentary on globalization and the eerie loneliness of modern life, "Let Down" has a particularly spatial feel to it, so I chose to explore the ethereal but mundane cityscapes that I find fascinating. I illustrated the song through the lens of an "architectural lobotomy," a thematic term coined by architect Rem Koolhaas. I wanted to look out at a scene that you can't quite touch.



"Karma Police"

MAREN KARLSON

This piece presents the idea of an immortal, powerful, omniscient entity that haunts us, that sees every wrong direction we take on our journey through our own labyrinth of error and ignorance. While we are eternally transforming, we are never flawless. We are always just one second away from being caught.



"Fitter Happier"

MAX GUTHER

"Improve yourself" is the slogan of today's society, but if we don't allow ourselves to rest and make mistakes, we will always only mark time.



"Electioneering"

CAMILO MEDINA

"Electioneering" makes me think of a politician who's touring the country, saying what people want to hear—but those same people will be screwed by these individuals who are only driven by greed and a thirst for power. It's a feeling that hits especially close to home right now.



"Climbing Up the Walls"

JESSE DRAXLER

The idiom "climbing up the walls" means self-agitation through fear, anxiety, stress—being stalked by inner demons. The monster and its victim. The haunting of yourself, by yourself.



"No Surprises"

SONNENZIMMER

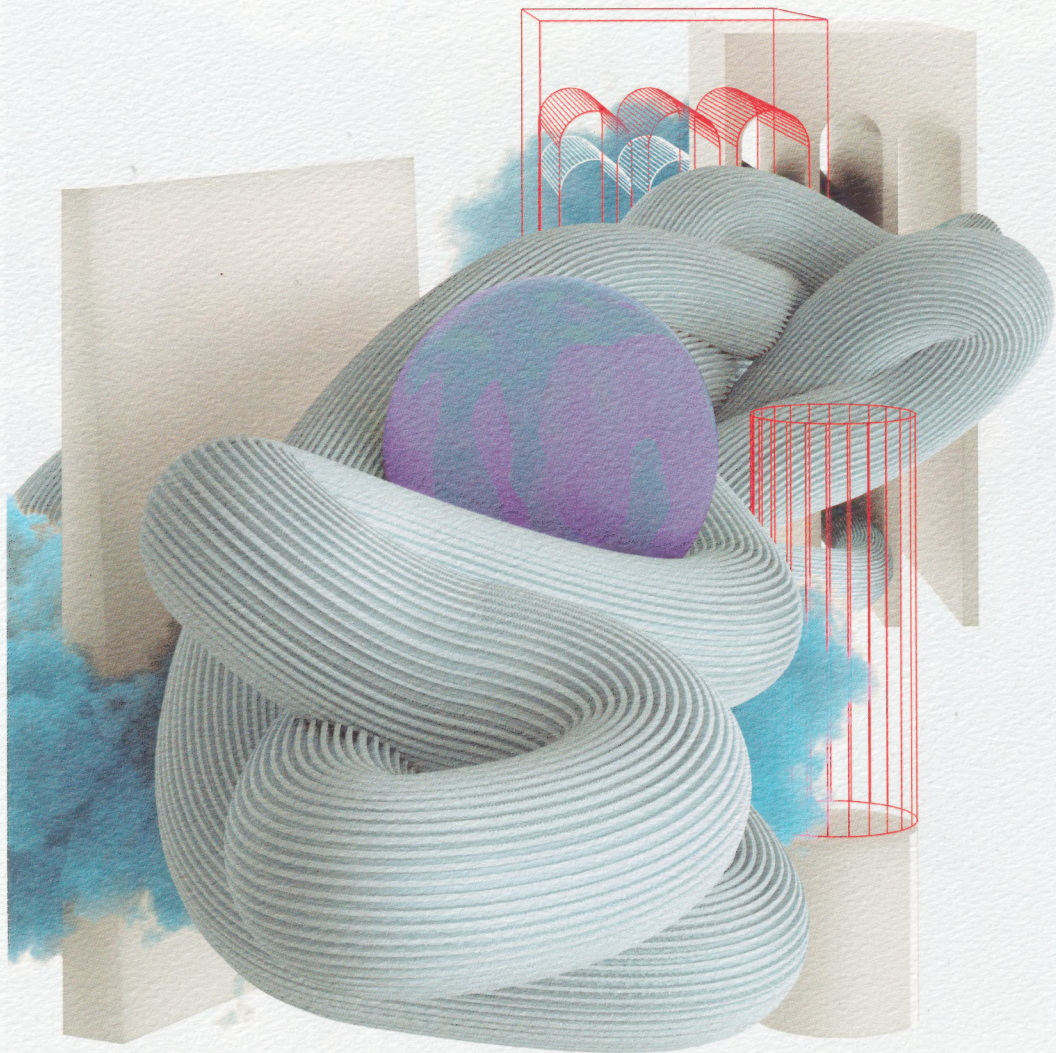
"No Surprises" has always struck us as an eerie lullaby for the archaic human. We wanted our interpretation of the song to pick up on the lush sound that teeters between warmth and despair—a nearly impossible balance of saccharine tragedy.



"Lucky"

GERIKO (HÉLÈNE JEUDY &
ANTOINE CAËCKE)

We listened to "Lucky" as a warning from the '90s, a premonitory dream of the coming decades. By reusing the symbols of the song, we drew the outcome of this dream: It is a rain of plane. The victims have their eyes wide open, the survivors are blind.



"The Tourist"

WANG & SÖDERSTRÖM

This song tells a metaphoric story about a journey that no longer knows its goal—the point disappeared deep down in a frenetic search. It's about going too fast and missing the most important parts. Slow down, and the way will reveal itself.

Pitchfork